

JULY 26, 1985

TO: Pearlstine, Holden, Hinson, Schuster, Lemmer

FROM: Mossberg

Attached you'll find a letter of advice from me to Dick Martin, who is due to be the next victim of Delta Data.

I am sending it along to you guys as well to serve as sort of my after-action report on the last six weeks here.

While it is obviously critical of CSF, I have no complaints about the other people who helped us during the process. Without Rich Schuster, Cathy Fiducia, and Tim Lemmer on site, and Dan Hinson and Rich Holden lending support, we'd have been sunk. Thanks.

Walt

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July 26, 1985

Dear Dick,

Soon you will be joining the ranks of the Delta-Data-ized. Beware.

Hoping you can learn from our trials, I'm enclosing the final versions of the Delta Data user guides we distributed here for reporters and editors. These guides are separate from, and additional to, the (awful) manual published by Delta and the pretty good, but overly general, guide produced by DJ.

I understand that you have decided to establish, as we did, some internal addresses for routing copy before it goes to NY. I urge you to also ask for some preconfigured function keys that make addressing and filing copy easy.

Here are some warnings, however:

1. DJ's Computer Services Facility, which handles training, is grudging in its willingness to support the news department, and has surprisingly little notion of how a newsroom works. Because of this, the news department is trying to decide if we should establish our own computer department. But in the meantime, you're stuck with CSF.

2. There is only one training person at CSF, Nancy Wolfe, with a good grasp of newsroom needs and procedures. She was hired by CSF recently after an excellent stint as a news assistant in Philadelphia who had really mastered the Delta. Unfortunately, she's not being assigned to work on the Chicago installation. In fact, she's held in some suspicion by her colleagues precisely because she's viewed as too sympathetic to news people (I know this is incredible. I know the Journal is the most important part of DJ. I'm just reporting the facts to you).

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3. When I was asked to review the training done here, I complained that it reflected little understanding of how a newsroom works or how to talk to reporters and editors. For instance, the chief trainer, Neil Rillen, treated as natural and reasonable and no big deal the fact that we will no longer be able to type in quotation marks, because of a fluke in the system (you have to use a double apostrophe on a function key). Instead, he should have candidly told his trainees: "here's a ludicrous shortcoming in the system, and here's how we're trying to get around it."

4. I recommended that Neil, who will be doing your training, fly to Chicago for a day or two well ahead of time, to meet with you and get a feel for how your bureau runs. In our case, we never talked to him til a day or two before training began, and his original training plans included insufficient classes, and night and weekend sessions that we rejected. I'm told, however, that my suggestion (made to Neil's boss, Al Miner) was instantly dismissed. So, given that Wolfe isn't coming there, I suspect your training will be pretty perfunctory.

5. The technical types at DJ were most unhappy that we asked Wolfe to program the special function keys on the Delta so that reporters could use one or two keystrokes to add codes and headers to stories and to send them to various addresses within the bureau. They argued that this was a bad idea because people wouldn't be forced to manually type in the complicated computerese commands otherwise required by the system. I held firm, arguing that reporters should concentrate on writing and reporting and that manipulating this system should take as little effort as possible. Here's an example of the problem: to read a take requires jotting down a number as a list scrolls by and typing in something like ``o:djb0098.'' To send a story to our spot desk and a printer requires typing in this sequence: ``g:TRANSMIT waspt walpb CONTROL TRANSMIT''. I did agree to revise these function keys, making them slightly less automated in order to avoid piling up duplicates of files in the system. But I refused to do away with them.

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As for the equipment itself...don't ask. All three parts of the system -- the Delta Data terminals, the IMOS software, and the DEC minicomputer on which IMOS runs -- have failed here in various ways. We have felt like a test site, not a purchaser of a market-ready system. What follows is a summary, based only on what I've been told or noticed, which probably isn't everything.

A. DIGITAL COMPUTER -- We lost at least two disk drives, causing copy to vaporize or be mangled. Digital was, however, commendably fast at fixing it.

B. IMOS System Software -- Went through a ten-day period of mangling stored copy, merging unrelated stories together and adding gibberish to copy (beyond the normal reporters' gibberish). Having said that, I feel this was the most reliable part of the system and that the IMOS people from London were the easiest to get along with, even though our internal routing system and function keys posed a challenge to the software. We had on site Keith Thompson, the son of IMOS' president. You're getting somebody else I've never met.

C. DELTA DATA 8303 and 8303/PC TERMINALS -- This is one of the most unprofessional companies I've ever dealt with. Both of the terminal models we have here display numerous flaws -- ranging from minor things like noisy fans to major ones like a tendency to freeze or lock up in such a way that you're forced you to destroy copy before you can use the machine again. The worst problems are with the PC model. It not only locks up at certain times while transmitting to the IMOS, but it freezes whenm you try and use the disk drives on it -- the supposed advantage of the thing. After much yelling by me (fully backed up by Communications, CSF, Rich Schuster and Dan Hinson), and after Norm personally reamed out the president of Delta Data, they are moving to fix the machines. But I have little faith this will work out well or easily. My own machine now has a test model of the replacement chips and it still has some lockups -- one of which occurred yesterday in front of a Delta Data vice president who was sitting here talking to me.

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LETTER TO DICK MARTIN - 4

All of this has convinced me that, if we can modify commercially available computers and software to talk to the IMOS, we should junk the Deltas eventually. As you know, the company is trying out this concept on a Compaq computer with hard disk, and Boston and Houston will be test sites for it. I understand there are still some things that need solving on this project. But if it works, it'd be better than the Deltas.

Good luck in your chosen profession.

Walt

Mossberg
Washn

CC: Pearlstine
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